Handle with Care

Never shake a baby
Handle with Care: Babies are fragile and precious. Never shake a baby.

Unlike most precious goods, babies don’t come with a set of handling instructions. In some ways they’re surprisingly tough, yet they’re also quite fragile. Many people feel nervous about holding babies at first. This leaflet offers some helpful tips on safe, positive ways of holding and caring for your baby. It also explains why rough handling, especially shaking, is dangerous and can cause serious injuries.

Remember that injuries caused by shaking don’t happen accidentally during normal play so this advice shouldn’t stop you cuddling, playing and doing all the things your baby really enjoys.

Once you’ve read this leaflet, why not put it up on a wall at home so that friends, babysitters or anyone who’s looking after your child can read it too?

What Babies DON’T Like

- Being held with their heads or backs unsupported
- Being held at arm's length – this makes babies feel insecure
- Any rough handling, such as being gripped too tightly or having a bottle or dummy pushed in to their mouths
- Being picked up very suddenly
- Very rough play
- Shaking – this can cause serious, permanent injuries or even death

Why is it Dangerous to Shake a Baby?

A baby’s head is big and heavy compared to the rest of their body. Unless supported, the head flops around because the muscles aren’t yet strong enough to hold it still. Shaking makes the head move back and forth very quickly and with great force. When this happens, tiny blood vessels can tear and bleed inside the baby’s brain, causing one or more of the following: blindness, deafness, fits, learning difficulties, brain damage or even death.

Can Shaking Harm Older Children?

The danger is greatest for babies under 12 months, but shaking can cause the same serious injuries in older babies and toddlers.

Can Other Kinds of Rough Handling Cause Injuries?

Yes, particularly hitting a baby on the head. Throwing babies in the air may seem like fun, but can be dangerous. Keep to gentle games until children are much older.

Remember...

Babies are fragile and precious. Never shake a baby.

Even if your baby seems ill or stops breathing for any reason, don’t shake them as this can cause more damage.

If you do ever lose control and shake a baby, get medical help immediately, preferably at your local hospital. A delay could be fatal.

Why Would Anyone Shake a Baby?

Some parents or carers may lose control and shake their baby in a moment of anger or frustration, especially if the baby cries a lot or has problems feeding. Many don’t realise the damage that shaking can do, and some may even think that it’s better than smacking. But remember, it is never ok to shake or smack a baby.

Important Advice

Even if a baby seems to have stopped breathing, don’t shake. Doctors’ advice is to flick the soles of the feet, rocking the cot or picking up the baby, with the neck supported.
Coping with Crying

Crying is the only way babies can tell us how they feel or what they need. If you've done all the obvious checks (hunger, thirst, etc.) and the crying doesn't stop, try:

- Cuddling (remember, picking up and cuddling a crying baby isn’t ‘spoiling’ them)
- Gently rocking the baby in a cradle or pram
- Singing
- Walking up and down with the baby in your arms or in a sling
- Playing music
- If the crying seems abnormal for your baby or you think they may be unwell, consult your doctor or Public Health Nurse.

If the crying ever feels too much to bear:

- Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Put the baby down in a safe place, like a cot or pram. Go into another room and sit down for a few minutes, perhaps with a cup of tea. Once you feel calmer, go back to your baby.
- Ask a friend or relative to take over for a while.
- Try not to get angry with your baby as this will only make the crying worse.
- Never let things get so bad that you feel desperate. There are lots of ways you can get help. Talk to your Doctor, Public Health Nurse, or ring one of the contacts listed in this leaflet.

Who Can Help?

- **Local Services**: For advice about any aspect of caring for your baby, talk to your Public Health Nurse or GP. In an emergency ring 999, or go to your nearest hospital which has an Accident & Emergency Department, if you know exactly where it is and can get there quickly. The HSE can also provide support to families under stress.

- **Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children** - 29 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin 2. Tel: (01) 6767960. Provides advice to parents in understanding children’s needs and a range of support services.

- **Parentline** – Tel: (01) 8733500. Offers a support service to parents experiencing difficulties in their parenting. Provides a Helpline, Support group and face to face appointments.

- **One Family** - 2 Lower Pembroke St, Dublin 2. Tel: (01) 6629212: Offers support, information and services to all members of all one-parent families, to those experiencing an unplanned pregnancy and to those working with one-parent families.

- **National Parents Council (Primary)** – Tel: (01) 8874034

- **National Parents Council (Post-Primary)** – Tel: (01) 8302740 / 8302747

- **Barnardos** – Christchurch Square, Dublin 8. Tel: (01) 4530355: Provides practical and professional supports to children and families.

- **La Leche League** – Website: www.lalecheleagueireland.com: A voluntary organisation dedicated to supporting mothers to breastfeeding their babies successfully.

Don’t keep it to Yourself

If you suspect a child is being ill-treated or neglected please contact your local HSE Social Worker or the Gardai.

For advice you can contact ISPCC at (01) 6767960 or your local ISPCC office, to find out more please see [www.ispcc.ie](http://www.ispcc.ie)